CHAPTER II

SELFHOOD: A PERSPECTIVE
2.1 Introducing Selfhood

To search for oneself is an inborn tendency of man. Man has also been trying to realise his own position, significance and value in this universe. One of the most notable things about human beings that distinguish us from other species is our self awareness and ability for self reflects. It is not easy to end up with a conclusion regarding one’s own self image. ‘Who am I?’ happens to be a perennial question throughout the ages. Human personality is inherently a social product. Man has been able to achieve distinctly human attributes of language, critical thinking, sense of responsibility and conscience. Affiliations with social, religious, sporting, political or other groups as well as our personal views on our selves such as being an individual, special, generous, charitable, helpful, mean, angry, short, beautiful and any other labels that we can assign to ourselves add up to our self-concept. The more the society expands the more experienced people become.

Experiences constitute selfhood. The self is the idea of the unified being. It is also the source of consciousness. The state of having a distinct identity is narrowly termed as ‘selfhood’. The basic thing that matters is the context that shape the very concept of ‘self’. The term ‘self’ is synonymously used with self-concept, self esteem, identity, subjectivity, personality, consciousness. The concept of self is always in process. James Ward (1843-1925), an English Psychologist and philosopher recognised the unity and continuity of self behind the plurality of conscious phenomena. It is never fixed. Various factors work simultaneously in the constitution of self of a person. Self emerges from social, historical and societal process that transcends any individual-society dichotomy or
separation. Identity, in harmony with selfhood, has become one of the main concepts in social science. The meaning of the term ‘identity’ or ‘selfhood’ does not simply refer to the concept. As mentioned by Paul Gulian Cobben in his book *The Nature of the Self: Recognition in the Form of Right and Morality*, human self, according to Aristotle, the animal rationale is essentially a social self, a self that lives in the framework of a state. (2009: 2)

The Oxford Learners Dictionary defines self as ‘the type of person you are, especially the way you normally behave, look or feel’. The self that is projected or chosen soon becomes a part of involuntary order of necessity, a historical self accountable for its past and in need of imaginative meditation with a new voluntary projection and the choice of self. Our selves are formed in interaction with others. The concept of self is composed of relatively permanent self assessments such as personality attributes, knowledge of one’s skill and abilities, one’s occupation and hobbies, awareness of one’s physical attributes. The self-concept is not restricted to the present. It includes past selves and present selves. Future selves or possible selves represent individual’s ideas of what they might become and what they are afraid of becoming. They correspond to hopes, fears, standard, goals and threats. Possible selves may function as incentives for future behaviour and they also provide an evaluative and interpretative context for the current view of self. William Heard Kilapatrick in his book *Selfhood and Civilisation* comments:

No one is born self, nor is selfhood merely a matter of internal maturation. Selfhood has to be achieved. The process of achieving selfhood is an extended one, involving various degrees. This selfhood can be achieved only and necessarily in a social milieu and the surrounding culture enters essentially into a process of achieving as well as into the resulting character achieved. (1923: 13)
Nick Mansfield in his book *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* comments The focus of the self as the centre of both lived experience and of discernible meaning has become one of the, if not the, defining issues of modern and post-modern cultures. (2000:1)

Self as well as identity are complex notion, especially in interdisciplinary terms. The very concept of selfhood is dealt with differently in different discipline. Each discipline has its own definition and uses the terms differently according to its own tradition. Attempt has been made to see the concept of selfhood from different disciplines. The formation of self acquires seminal point of discussion in all the disciplines. The interpretation of Assamese selfhood is attempted through a multidimensional approach.

2.1.1 Emergence of the Concept of Selfhood

Selfhood is to be found in the oscillation of the projecting self and the projected self. In fact the self that is projected and chosen becomes a part of the involuntary order of necessity, a historical self accountable for its past and in need of imaginative meditation with new voluntary projection and the choice of self. Imagination is seated at a vertical and horizontal or cognitive or practical crossroad. Imagination calls for deliberation to come to a close choice that moves from interior to exterior. Evidences are not less in human history that imagination moulds the living environment into different forms of art forms. Association with the outer world, experiences in the different context, roles and relationship in the society, memories, the first person perspectives, internal relationship of experiences etc contribute to determination of self. The concept of self is not a monolithic concept; rather it is variable and complex. To exist is a spiral process that dramatically unfolds in time.
The account of the origin of selfhood is that the self comes into being at the interface between the inner biological processes of human body and socio-cultural network to which the person belongs. The nature and expression of self has been a topic of interest since time immemorial. The very concept of self is a promising meeting area to explore. The naive approach to selfhood is the understanding of how we learn to take a view on ourselves according to other’s reaction to us. Man’s experience in this world is multi dimensional. A Philosophy of self is based on psychological investigations of man’s multidimensional experience is the solvent of universal doubt and spiritual perplexity prevailing at present. The study of both East and West bears testimonials in their different critical text. The term ‘self’ has acquired various meaning as it journeyed through layers of scholastic phases. The understanding of the very concept of self involves social relation.

Paulina Remes and Juha Sihvola in their book Ancient Philosophy of Self (2008) quoted Christopher Gill in his two approaches to selfhood which is labelled as ‘objective-participant’ and ‘subjective-individualist’. They remark that any completed view of selfhood will be participant, since it will include social relations among other things. Dan Zahavi (2005) differentiates the notion of self as a narrative construction and as an experiential dimension. The first view conceives self as the product of narratively structured life. The stress is on linguistic and social character of self. The second view insists on the investigation of self necessitates the involvement of the first person perspective within the multitude of changing experience.

2.1.2 Framework of Selfhood

The view of self as subjective versus objective is seen to be the topic for deliberate discussion in almost all major schools of thought.
Every historical epoch distinctive ways of organising time, space and behaviour while constructing selfhood. The process of oscillation between subjectivity and objectivity generates constant construction and reconstruction of selfhood throughout the life of a person. William James (1980) in his seminal chapter ‘The Consciousness of the Self’ made a distinction between ‘I’ and ‘Me’, the ‘self-as-subject’ (the self whose function includes perceiving, performing, thinking and remembering through which it is the ‘knower’, the ‘I’) and ‘self-as-object’ (the self that has certain physical, social, emotional attributes through which it becomes the ‘known’, the ‘me’). Self as object is further divided into three ‘hierarchically ordered constituents: the spiritual Me at the top, the social Me in the middle and the material Me at the bottom. Paranjape describes James’ view of self in the following words:

James’s views in this regard are best summerised in his own words:

To have a self that I care for, nature must first present me with some object interesting enough to make me instinctively wish to appropriate it for its own sake, and out of it manufacture one of those material, social and social selves. (2002:82)

Self is constructed linguistically. Dan Zahavi (2005) also stresses upon the linguistic construct of self commenting that “the self must be classified as a linguistic construct or as a product of reflection”. In connection of the present study it is clear that language being one of the seminal modes of communication best expresses the inner feelings around the natural phenomena through various forms of narratives. These as a whole initiate to form an all pervasive view of Assamese selfhood.

The word ‘self’ generally appears in person centered discourse. Rom Harré (2001) in his article ‘Metaphysics and narrative: Singularities and Multiplicities of Self’ identifies three psychologically diverse context
in which self is projected in person centered discourse, viz. Perception, reflexion and social interaction. Self in the context of perception is generally presented as a unique, context free location always related to where the body is in space and strictly contemporary. Self in the context of reflection is generally singular but it is continuously changing by memory of live events. Self in the context of social relation is generally multiple. One of the major issues is the distinction between descriptive and evaluative components of self. Another issue is concerned with the question of change versus stability of self. The selfhood in this thesis is seen as a combined effect of the three types of discourses. The Assamese self is projected as an organic whole that has seen phases of changes through the periods of history.

Out of the historical variability the natural atmosphere fed by the Brahmaputra has remained a constant factor to conceive the sense of belongingness for the inhabitants of Assam. The interpersonal interaction through group activities as well as personal expression in the form of fiction and non-fiction writing unfold the attachment with the river. The Brahmaputra making and remaking the history of Assam is conceived as ‘looking glass self’. Charles Horton Cooley’s (1912) concept of ‘looking glass self’ is yet another development in the construction of selfhood. It states that a person’s self grows out of society’s interpersonal interaction and perception of others. Accordingly, humans begin to define themselves within the context of their socialization. These are stored in personal as well as communal memories. What is remembered as our connection with the environment through the time is a clue to who we are. Narratives of a community preserve memories. A sense of self is constructed by and through narratives- the stories we tell ourselves and each other about our lives. In his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690, Book II, Chapter 27), John Locke famously identified the self with memory. Partha
Chatterjee (2002) also comments “Locke is saying that consciousness or memory is constitutive of personal memory. If there is no memory there is no identity. The relationship of memory with the identity and selfhood is also highlighted by David C Rubin’s following comment from his book Autobiographical Memory:

Autobiographical memory is about the self... Autobiographical memory is the source of information about our own lives, from which we are likely to make judgement about our own personalities, predicts of our own... however also provides a sense of identity and continuity. (1988:7)

The notion of self as a performer and self as character is another way of understanding the componential structure of self. Erving Goffman (1959) comments on his view of the individual which can be seen in terms of this twofold structure:

... he was viewed as a performer, a harried fabricator of impressions involved in the all-too-human task of staging a performance: he was viewed as a character, a figure, typically a fine one, whose spirit, strength and other sterling qualities the performance was designed to evoke. (1959:252)

2.2. Interdisciplinary Approach to Selfhood

It is also found that the notion of personal selfhood is a product of Western culture and was unknown in the great culture of the East. Different disciplinary specialities looked into the issue of self with the help of their respective tools as well as rules of discourse. Philosophy, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Phenomenology all look into the concept from crucial spheres. That man needs an identical concept is very much connected with the idea of human existence.
Theories and research throughout the ages have identified different theoretical issues pertaining to the nature of self. Questions were also raised whether self is a part of the ego, personality, identity, consciousness and soul. In this connection reference can be made of M. Brinthaupt and Richard P Lipka:

Self researchers have variously defined self as (1) schema (Markus, 1983), prototype (Rogers 1981) or cognitive recognition (Kihlstrom et al 1988); (2) a multidimensional hierarchical construct (Marsh and Shavelson 1985); (3) a narrative sequence (Gargen & Gargen 1988); (4) a linguistic description of subjective experience (Young-Eisendrath & Hall 1987) and (5) an elaborate theory (1992:3)

The field of study regarding self is replete with alternative and sometimes contradictory perspectives. Accordingly, self is closely tied to past experiences with its defining characteristics fitting together into a coherent whole. And the past is viewed from the present. On the other hand Marsh and his colleagues focus on the structure and content of the self. The aspect of multidimensionality is attached with it.

The study of the relationship between culture and personality show that the development of both is subject to mutual influences. Selfhood is considered to be resulting from internalisation of culture and culture is regarded as projection of selfhood. It also refers to the concept of how an individual is viewed and identified by others. The meaning of identity is directly related to other sociological concepts like worldview, value, ethos, and a certain kind of homogeneity among members of a community. Another noticeable aspect of this view of selfhood concerns the presupposition of stability and permanence. People are found to share the same identity because they share the same history. Nevertheless, the concept of ‘culture’ has undergone changes in the recent years. Culture is
no longer associated with the exotic rituals but instead it has become part of popular discourse all over the world. The very concept of the term ‘culture’ is gaining enormous implication for the understanding of the self. In this context a dialogic perspective of self is required to take into account the increasing number of voices and counter voices that are represented in the self of the multicultural citizens. Danieal Dannett, an American Philosopher of the early 90s advocated a deflationary theory of self. According to him selves are not physically dictatable. They need not correspond to anything tangible. Culture, now, is multi vocal and polyphonous. Culture is no longer regarded as unchanging and identical for all individual, but as an inherently dynamic process of domination and marginalisation of in which individuals are positioned differently. In the increasingly multicultural concept identity obtains its concept from the identity of the other from which self is contrasted. Nevertheless, the focus is on the fractured identities as well as their flexibility and changeability. Identity turns out to be a nexus at which different construction of self coincides and collide. Hall (1996) stresses on the concept of identity as an intersection of temporary attachment to different subject position in various discourses and practice.

2.2.1. Philosophical

The concept of selfhood is rooted in the idea that to be human is to be social. The existence and evolution of self has undergone major shifts from the days of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Socrates started his philosophical mission with the concept ‘Man, know thyself’. His idea of individualism was never dissociated from the society. Plato in his ‘The Republic’ talked of the theory of soul to be the origin of the theory of the state. The moral and aesthetic aspect of man is highlighted in his theory. The notion of self was very difficult to define in Aristotle. He believed human cognition always takes place on the model of its basic objects
namely, external sensible things. Inevitably one has to represent oneself as spatially extended. Edwin Hartman observes:

According to Aristotle and his modern successors personal identity and continuity are a matter of bodily identity and continuity. A person is a body. The continuity of a material substance through space and time requires that each moment it has and indeed be a particular essence. (1977: 96)

Plato, at least in many of his dialogues, held that the true self of human beings is the reason or the intellect that constitutes their soul and that is separable from their body. Aristotle, for his part, insisted that the human being is a composite of body and soul and that the soul cannot be separated from the body. Aristotle's philosophy of self was constructed in terms of hylomorphism in which the soul of a human being is the form or the structure of the human body or the human matter, i.e., the functional organization in virtue of which human beings are able to perform their characteristic activities of life, including growth, nutrition, reproduction, perception, imagination, desire, and thinking.

The definition of self during the fifteen century disregards any reference to society or social context and fastens exclusively on what the self is in itself.

Western philosophy has been intensively preoccupied with in singling out and defining the individual self. For the domain of philosophy self is the idea of a unified being which is the source of consciousness. Descartes, Locke, Hume and William James, George Wilhelm, Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Heidegger contributed to the idea of self as exhibited in the conduct and discourse of the concerned individual.

René Descartes (1596-1650) built up a philosophical system that included a mode of inquiry. It made an account of human psychology
intended to ground an ethics. The basic concern of Descartes was to suspend his belief in the reality of the external world—everything which we perceive with our senses. Descartes’ idea roots back to the influence of the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism. Renaissance and Reformation as cultural movements are unfolded in the context of the decaying social and economic order of the Middle Ages. Catholicism was a culture of community and hierarchy. The individual had its predetermined place in both; individual freedom was limited by social status and spiritual directives. Catholicism was thus a culture that provided certainty and security to individuals who might otherwise feel abandoned and lost. Protestantism furthered a culture of individualistic self-reliance. By setting the individual free in his or her conscience, by defying the spiritual authority of the church and its worldly extensions, Protestantism became one of the origins of modern individualism in general. The old stable world of the Middle Ages was gone, and a new permanent order had not yet been established. Old truths had become increasingly doubtful, but new ones had not yet firmly taken hold of people's minds. The new interest in scientific research produced the basis of what was to become the sound knowledge of the future, but confidence in that knowledge was as yet far from general. Scepticism and uncertainty prevailed. It was the passion and declared goal of Descartes to put an end to the pervasive scepticism and uncertainty of the age.

According to Descartes there is a divide intrinsic to human consciousness. One cannot ever bridge the space between one’s consciousness and that of another. It is termed as Cartesian self. The Cartesian position is a form of dualism.

David Hume (1711-1776) believes on the association of a bundle of sensation with self. For him there is nothing called mind or self. Self is nothing but a bundle of experiences linked by the relation of causation and
resemblances. He considered it to be a lived unity that proceeds through time. The stimulus can be external or internal. Hume believes that these perceptions do not belong to anything. For him the question of personal identity becomes a matter of characterising the loose cohesion of one's personal experience. It is said that Hume's idea of self bears similarity with the Buddhist conception of self. Hume further deliberates over a position of identity of an invariable and uninterrupted existence. Hume confirms there is no primordial substance as to where all secondary existences of individual existence exist. Everything in our conscious state is derived from impressions. Objects in the outer world exist as distinct species that are separable from the secondary qualities in conscious thought. To negate any demonstration of substance Hume posits an analogy that if life was reduced to below that of an oyster, does this entity have any one perception as thirst or hunger? The only thing that would exist is the perception. Adding a higher complex of perception would not yield any notion of substance that could yield an independent and constant self.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was concerned with two conceptions of self i.e. inner self and outer self. Inner self refers to the consciousness of one's self and one's psychological states in inner sense and outer self refers to one state via performing acts of appreciation. According to him every person's self is actually composed of two aspects: a transcendental subject or ego which is the ground of all knowledge and perception, and an empirical ego which is what is observed when we introspect, or the thing we impute to other people with qualities and attributes.

2.2.2. Psychological

It was William James (1842-1910) who accumulated the concept of self as a subject matter of the study of Psychology. It occupies large domains in the field of psychology. Development of this new science of mind is of great significance to the other related discipline. For him
identity is a social self. We come to know ourselves with the contact of others. As psychology involves the scientific study of mental functions and behaviours it has the immediate goal of understanding individual and groups in the society. Exploration of the concepts such as perception, cognition, attention, motivation, interpersonal demands intrinsic study of human experiences. A sound philosophy of self studies various mental states and processes and different modes of human experience. Investigation into human experience may turn out to be a clue for forming a correct notion of the ultimate nature of self. As observed by Sauravpran Goswami “A philosophy of self based on psychological investigations of man’s multi-dimensional experience is the solvent of universal doubt and spiritual perplexity prevailing at present.” (2008:2)

William James distinguishes self in terms of ‘I’ and ‘Me’. Self is composed of partly subject and partly object, the knower and the known. Noting various constituents of self James distinguished the Material Me, the Social Me and the Spiritual Me. The material self is constituted by our body, clothes, immediate family and home. The social self is concerned with our interaction with the society. The social self is itself multidimensional. Besides the three selves James also spoke of the pure ego or the inner principle of personal unity. (Goswami, p-9)

Experience of life is not static. It continues through space and time. People are similar or different because they are products of similar or different social relations. The cognitive and affective representation of one’s identity is determined by the development of all others with whom one is directly associated with. William McDougall (1871-1938) recognised the unity and continuity behind the plurality of conscious phenomena. He conceived self as actual, as the subject of our mental life, the ultimate basis of our psychic activities.
The concept is rooted in some simple, universal human experience. Self has undergone changes in the recent history from the relatively straightforward and untroubled way that selfhood was understood in medieval Europe to complex and complicated selfhood found in Western culture today. The question of self deals with the human potential and fulfilment. During the medieval society the dominant force was the Christianity. During the romantic period the attention is focussed on the uniqueness and distinctness as against the view of the same goal for human being. It opens up new vistas during 19th and 20th century as starting with inner exploration of the self. But the notion of individuation and self actualisation also fail to achieve the goals. The works of Freud, Adler and Jung opened up newer and newer vistas in the direction of formation and expression of selfhood.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) questioned the evidence of consciousness. For him conscious state mind of mind is sufficient to explore the idea of unconsciousness. He explored the dark realm of unconsciousness. Freud carried the Socratic injunction ‘know thyself’ into new depths. As Rollo May observes:

The great contribution of Freud was his carrying of Socratic injunction ‘know thyself’ into the new depths of compromise, in effect, a new continent, the continent of repressed, unconscious motives. (1969:51)

Freud believes unconscious has power than the conscious. By the term ‘conscious’ Freud meant that segment of the mind which is concerned with the immediate awareness. A state of consciousness is characteristically very transitory. The unconscious coincides with what is latent and capable of being conscious. He believes that the personality or the self is constituted by a series of identifications. (Jonathan Culler, 1997:114) Freud established the view that the unconscious is the dynamic region of mind. Freud thought if the unconscious as somewhat like a
hidden God—indifferent, impersonal, unconcerned about the life of its creation. In order to have an accumulated view of Freud’s perception of self his ideas on id, ego and super ego cannot be overlooked. Id, ego and super ego are the three parts of the psychic apparatus defined in Freud’s structural model of human psyche. They represent functions of the mind. In Freud’s view the ultimate driving factor is the libido or the sexual energy. In this connection S. Goswami observes:

In every manifestation of mind there lie hidden sex desires which may be discovered through analysis. Thus all higher and nobler achievements of man are nothing but socially acceptable outlets of this sex-urge. There is nothing disgusting about it. The important thing ethically is that the libidinal impulses are repressed. (2008:35)

S. Goswami (1955) says that Freudian tripartite division of self indicates two levels of internal dialogue. One is between the coherent ego and the incoherent id, and the other one is between the ego and the super ego. The presence of self in the dialogue between ego and super ego deserves attention and is proved to be obscure. It is really a dialogue between the self as concerned with itself and the self in relation to the society. S. Goswami (2008) comments

Freudian super ego is no more than the pressure of society upon the ego and it does not occur to Freud that the self has both the power to defy the community for the sake of its interest and for the sake of its interest more inclusive than those of a given community. (2008:38)

Freud never denied the reality of free self. In connection with term ‘free self’ he advocates that freedom never comes automatically. It has to be actualised by choice. The modern definition of self has come to depend on a changing, uncertain mixture of choices. Selfhood is assumed to contain values on which these choices are made. Man is exposed to a number of situations in every walk of life and is thereby unfolded to a
The determining factor in such a situation depends upon whether the individual can think independently or not. Freedom is gained when there is a broadened consciousness. In this connection Bakan comments:

The aim of psycho analytical thought is the production of greater freedom for the individual, releasing him from the tyranny of the unconscious, which is, in Freud's view, the result of social oppression. (1959:170)

When Freud talks about a real self he considered it to be an extension of consciousness, a discovery of human self freed from all limits, lies and illusion. Freud carried creativity into the realm of consciousness. The notion of a free creative self that transcends the biological and social selves in his remarkable contribution to human thought. It was Plato who placed reason as man's true self. Unlike the traditional theorists who placed the essence of self in thought and consciousness, Freud, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer warned against overestimating the role of consciousness and regarded the unconscious as the inaccessible core of our being. The self's freedom enables us to be a creator. But the self is not simply a creator but also a creature of events, in the creation of which it participates. Such a view indicates the relationship between self and society. Anthony Elliott observes:

The self is seen as primarily cognitive by symbolic interactionists because the seeds of self consciousness are understood to derive from individuals constantly manipulating and constructing identity in accordance with the conversation of gestures established through engagement with the social process... ... As the self is constructed entirely through interaction-the individual looking at the self, as it were, as others see there would seem to be little or no conflict between individual and society. (2008:36)
After Freud it was Adler who did pioneering jobs in the field of psychology of self. Jung’s concept of self is not a speculative concept of the philosophers but a verity of experience. Developing individuality demands man’s concern that man should be conscious of all unconscious contents. The assimilation of these contents of unconscious, personal and collective is the way to complete integration. The most salient feature of Jung’s conception of self is the emphasis he places upon the process of individuation. It is important to note that the process of individuation is really a process by which the ego becomes more and more aware of its relationship to the non-ego, the collective psyche. For Adler it is an archetype. Goswami (2008) comments that the experience of God image is identical with the archetypal experience of the self.

With regard to the relation between individual and society the medieval society enjoyed a stable and fixed relationship. With the industrial revolution and the explosion of population social mobility became a norm. People abandoned the view that mankind should not question God’s ordering of this world. In this regard Sudhir Kakar’s (1997) comment is worth mentioning:

Psychoanalytical knowledge of a culture does not coincide with its anthropological, historical, or philosophical counterparts although there may be some overlap between them. It is primarily the knowledge of the culture’s imagination, of its fantasy as encoded in its symbolic products. (1997:15)

2.2.3. Anthropological and Sociological

The field of Anthropology looks into the concept of self as it emerges from the action of an individual. Anthropologists give their attention to construction of self which according to them culturally constructed. However, sociologists have done more elaborate attention on selfhood. Accordingly, the concept of self is a supplement to the concept of
culture as attached with reflexivity and agency. The anthropologists concentrates on the sociocentric way of experiencing the self i.e. in terms of one’s social role, the group, the community, the family or tribe, the deities, predecessors etc. as well as on the individualistic or egocentric structure of the self. From the literary point of view self is seen as a moot construct functioning in literary narratives. All study mainly directs towards the construct of self as a thoroughly cultured form of experience. It leads to the socio-cultural discussion of the temporality of subjectivity. With the development of individual identity came the capacity for self consciousness, self reference, self evaluation, self stimulation and self control. Human societies are thus arrangements of persons who are conscious of their own private experience and public behaviour and private experience of others. Community interaction and the growth of mutually meaningful identities are created out of the idiosyncrasies of numerous individuals. Human identity thus has both a private-individual side and public-collective face. Culture and personality have been studied in the interdisciplinary mode.

Sociological view on self was initiated by Erving Goffman (1922-82), a Canadian born sociologist and writer. His analysis on social interaction and production on self was performed with the metaphor of the theatre. Anthony Elliott observes:

The self consists for Goffman in an awareness of the multiplicity of roles that are performed in various situated contexts; such performances involve individuals in continually monitoring the impressions they give off to, and make upon, others; public identity is thus performed for an audience, and the private self knows that such performances are essential to identity and to the maintenance of respect and trust in routine social interaction. (2008:37)
In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Goffman provides an introduction to the sustenance of self in normally problematic situation, in the social establishment that are part of everyday life, interacting with people who are reasonably well equipped and well inclined to collaborate in sustaining mutually agreeable definition of self. The expressiveness of an individual in the immediate presence of others appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he gives and the expression that he gives off.

Every individual, more or less consciously, always and everywhere plays a role. Robert Ezra Park (1950) remarks that it is in those roles we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves. When the individual presents himself before others, his performance well tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behaviour as a whole. How we prefer to show ourselves to others depends on the context. Ervin Goffman in his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* quotes William James:

...we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct group of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club companion, to our customers as to the labourers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends. (1959:48)

Goffman explains how the self reacts to the societal rites and regulations through the concept of focussed and unfocussed interactions. When individual agreed to sustain a single focuss of cognitive and visual attention focussed attention occurs. Unfocussed interactions are interpersonal communication resulting solely by the virtue of an individual being in another’s presence. Both focussed and unfocussed interactions
occur in encounters. Encounters are the basis of perspectives and definitions of situation. Individuals present themselves in roles incorporating accepted societal values, an act that’s "an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community" (Goffman, 1956, p. 35). In the words of Goffman, an individual uses a front to define the situation for those involved in a face-to-face interaction or performance. This front includes the use of physical setting as well as the individual’s appearance and manner. Goffman felt that to present a compelling front, an individual embodies his social role in a consistently projected manner in a given physical setting. Goffman (1956) divides social setting into regions characterised by as places bounded by barriers to perception.

2.2.4. Phenomenological

The discussion of self under phenomenology considers its account with experience. The self is regarded as having mental and material effects. Avi Sion (2003) observes that ‘imaginations and mental feelings, as well as bodily movements, and sentiments, are considered (within our current world view) is indirectly caused by self, through its more immediate exercise of cognitive, volitional and emotional powers. While considering the factors of self it is found, according to Avi Sion, that sensation of and in the body, perception of the world, memories and fantasies, past and present beliefs and choices, verbal discourse, mental image of oneself, social projection, external possessions, names account for the framing of the concept of self. The phenomenologists believe that the feeling of self is shaped by the need of this system to be involved with intentionality, preserve coherence and manage conflicting, cognitive, emotional and motivational tendencies. Phenomenal selfhood is itself a pre-reflective element of every conscious experience.
Thomas Metzinger, a German Philosopher, deliberates on the phenomenal self in his pioneering book *Being No One: The Self Model Theory of Subjectivity* deliberates on phenomenal self. Accordingly, explanation of phenomenal selfhood seems fundamental to the explanation of consciousness. Metzinger argued that we are conscious subjects with conscious mental state. Both the concepts are integrately related. Conscious mental states, according to him, are phenomenal selves. Conscious sense of being and perception are the building blocks for selfhood formation. He observes:

What justifies treating all these highly diverse kinds of ... phenomenal representational content as belong to one entity ... [is] the property of mineness. Mineness is a property of a particular form of phenomenal content that, in our own case, is introspectively accessible on the level of inner attention as well as on the level of self-directed cognition.... Here are some typical examples of how we, linguistically, refer to this particular higher-order phenomenal quantity in folk-psychological contexts: “I experience my leg subjectively as always having belonged to me” (2003: 302)

2.2.5. Socio-Cultural and Environmental

The above discussion manifests that the foundation of the feeling of possessing the notion of selfhood lies in the social context. The self is constantly constructed and reconstructed through the socio-cultural context. Cultural aspects of society function as a window which reflects how individuals or groups see and define themselves, and how other individuals or groups see and define them. The identity of individuals and groups involves both elements of personal choice and responses and attitudes of others. Sharing meaning by the members of a group results in a mutually acceptable identification among the members.
The fusion of culture and nature nurtures human personality providing distinctiveness in selfhood. The remarkable book on selfhood entitled 'Models of Self' (1999) presents five varieties of knowledge out of which ecological knowledge gathers much importance. The self is built around what is gathered non-institutionally, traditionally and unofficially. The constituents of folklore of any given community encompass all understanding, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings and beliefs transmitted traditionally. People get emotionally connected with the environment where one lives. Within environmental psychology, the intersection of self and place has been explored in a variety of ways, giving varying degrees of importance to the nonhuman world itself. For some theorists, place is psychologically meaningful primarily as a means of regulating human interactions through privacy, territoriality, and the personalization of space, with important implications for identity (Altman, 1975). While writing about the environmental perspective of Identity formation Searle observes:

The nonhuman environment, far from being of little or no account to human personality development, constitutes one of the most basically important ingredients of human psychological existence. It is my conviction that there is within the human individual a sense, whether at a conscious or unconscious level, of relatedness to his nonhuman environment, that this relatedness is one of the transcendentally important facts of human living. (1960:5)

Environmental identity refers to the experienced social understandings of who we are in relation to, and how we interact with the nature.

The above discussion reveals it clearly that self is understood in context. For the folk mind the immediate environmental surrounding forms
the basis of the context. Participation and experience with the environment turn out to be the space to make a search for oneself.

2.3. Selfhood in Folklore

The concept of how folklore relates to the formation of selfhood has been of central concern since 19th century. Selfhood or identity is based on the symbols that are meaningful to all the members of a social group. Once the people engage themselves with a specific group and engage in the tradition that define the group they find that the group's folklore provides individual members with a means of determining for themselves what is valuable and what is discardable in terms of the construction of selfhood. Folklore items are associated with the identity of the group in two particular circumstances viz. Documentation and celebration. It is folklore which helps people to continue with the past thereby establishing a link with entire culture of the community. The folk songs, folktales, myths, ballads, rituals turn out to be crucial elements to distinguish a particular group with appropriateness. Exploring own heritage through folklore guides one to generate belongingness to a particular cultural group. Alan Dundes (1986) observes that individuals may behave differently in different setting but it is not so easy to shed one's national character. As culture is transmitted from generation to generation through a process of sharing it in turn becomes the principal means of conserving significant discoveries. At the same time, it also serves as the chief means for perpetuating distinctive characteristics of the group. Hence, cultural is the carrier of the components of selfhood.

The search for the self in the collective sense of the term requires commonality in the attitude, behavioural pattern, in the ways of life led by the common folk etc. This search never occurs outside one's cultural community. A glance into the root helps to find out the branches that unfurl the various facets of the commonality. When we encounter with questions
like who am I or what am I or what identifies me we look back what we have learnt traditionally and how I put myself into the social framework. That one’s definition of oneself requires finding out those aspects which differentiate from other groups of people. Among those aspects the sense of being attach to a place finds priority. The place around which one lives is endowed with cultural meaning i.e. ‘the traditional, unofficial, noninstitutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understanding, values, attitude, assumption, feelings and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by words of mouth or by customary examples’ (Beardslee, 2001). Such a study reinforces the importance of folklore in ascertaining various aspects of world view. The factors of folklore act as symbols in finding out a definition of oneself. Of particular import is the recognition that the folklore of the group is also used individually to define as well as to identify themselves. Consciously or unconsciously one is found to affirm to the way how his group members act or behave.

While concentrating on self from the folklore perspective the consideration of the oral lore as the means to attain self opens up the traditional materials of a group. It refers to a commonly experienced reality. Habits, which gradually embark and mingle with everyday life, are then culturally assimilated. In this sense, today’s society becomes a set of individual selves active in constructing their own identity, different selves that participate and promote social impulses with a sensible effect on a global level: the unit is now made of differences.

The connection between past and the present existence carries a legacy that helps to direct our search for ourselves. It tells us how our own group or community lived through ages creating specific tradition that differs it from other such groups. Thus meaning is constructed based on cultural attributes. Such meanings finally turn out to be the sources of identity formation. The meaning can be understood as a process of forming
selfhood of the concerned group. It involves commonly experienced reality with cultural assimilation. The common people’s involvement with their spontaneous activities visualise the common which in turn announces the existence. Existence is the foremost essence of the identification of selfhood with the help of mass participation. Moises de Lemos Martin (2001: 92) stresses on the functions of the collective thinking of a community saying that ‘the symbolic systems of a community, their collective imageries (folklore, language, myth, rites) are the incessant works through which human communities constitute themselves and at the same time announce their existence.’

Nature and her gifts is the base for forming habits as well as our engagement with any activity. These practices are the building blocks of folklore of a given community. Given that our primary human identity is our evolutionary identity, we are thus subject to the same natural laws and are just as dependent on a healthy functioning biosphere as any other animal. Instead of humanity and nature occupying separate ontological realms, now the dualism is internalized within human identity. Our primary identity is natural. Our culture, our historical conditions, the particularities of language, and the artifactual environment around us, these are the secondary constructs. They are artifacts because they are the products of human intention. Folklore study of selfhood raises the questions on the connection of nature and man’s attachment to it through their collective habits and practices.

From the Aristotelian understanding, self is the ‘functional organisation in virtue of human beings are able to perform their characteristics activities of life including growth, nutrition, reproduction, perception, imagination, desire, and thinking’. (Juha Sihvola, 2008). The activities mentioned here are the outcomes of collective imagination. One develops feelings of attachment to such activities if encountered at a regular basis and the same is also engaged in transmission. In Allen
Dundes essay ‘Defining Identity through Folklore’ he states to consider the relationship between folklore and identity. For Dundes folklore is a group defining mechanism. The folklore elements are the medium to show ourselves as different from other groups. Both traditionally and historically this process can be the best way to look into ourselves. The group’s folklore provides individual members a means of determining for themselves what is valuable and what is discernible in terms of externally definable concepts.

In Chapter III of this thesis attempts have been made to show how different traditionally performed activities are psychologically considered to be the markers of one’s self. Not only that the folk oral narratives like myths and legends used in connection with this study affirm our connectedness with the heritage of our existence. According to Bascom (1981) myths are prose narratives which, in the society they are told are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the past. Myth is also defined as a narrative which is considered socially important, and is told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance. (Eric Csapo, 2011).

2.4. Expression of Selfhood

Selfhood is semantically expressed through feeling, thoughts and activities in existence. Self is expressed through one’s being as one lives, acts and relates etc in the world. The experience of self gets expression in the cultural, artistic, literary and other practices of livelihood. Discourses expressing consciousness relate to our views on us, our past experiences, relationship with other individuals in the society, relationship with the phenomenal world. To understand the varied voices within a social group, voice of individual and the groups as well, requires a minute observation of the traditions latent in orality and literacy. The tradition is expressed through language. For Bakhtin, the text is an expression of consciousness
and it is something that reflects. The relationship between expressivism, belonging and identity is a major feature of the quest of selfhood that runs throughout the modern societies.

Self expression mediates between linguistic choices and social facts such as gender, occupation, linguistic ideology and place of origin, as speakers' use of language not only to express their identification with or rejection of social groupings but also to express their individuality. Charles Taylor remarked that 'What I am as self, my identity is essentially defined by the way things has significance for me'. (1989:34). Language encapsulates our values and world views, give expression to our feelings and define our cultural heritage. Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as members of society. (Taylor, 1989, p.1)

The notion of identity and medium of expression are not bound to be same in all the cultural contexts. The communicative nature of the cultural and narrative discourse transmits the value inherent in them from generation to generation and thereby generating collective memory. The psychological issues of memory and identity are integrated when they are studied from a point of view of language, discourse and narration. In the third decade of the present century the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) developed theories on cultural memory. He emphasises the fact that the specific character that a person derives from belonging to a distinct society and culture is not seen to maintain itself for generations as a result of phylogenetic evolution, but rather as a result of socialization and customs. The social or cultural memory functions as communicative memory. The concept of "communicative memory" includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications. These varieties, which M. Halbwachs gathered and
analyzed under the concept of collective memory, constitute the field of oral history. Memory about the place of existence thus communicated unfurls the inner self of a community. It also opens up scopes for studying folk narratives, songs, fiction writings, non-fiction writings which are the mediums of expressing self, both individual and collective. Literary texts are not simply written words. They are processes of self creation. It is meant that a group bases its consciousness of unity and specificity upon this knowledge and derives formative and normative impulses from it, which allows the group to reproduce its identity. In this sense, culture has the structure of memory. It reinforces the concept of self as narrative.

Halbwachs states every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others. These "others," however, are not just any set of people, rather they are groups who conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past, about their heritage. Halbwachs thinks of families, neighbourhood and professional groups, political parties, associations, etc., up to and including nations. Every individual belongs to numerous such groups and therefore entertains numerous collective self-images and memories.

This study will take into account the memories and narratives connected with the river Brahmaputra.

2.4.1. Role of Other

The notion of ‘Other’ is a key concept in the understanding of ‘self’. The representative quality outside the self, that is, outside one’s own gender, social group, class, culture or civilisation, is the Other. It is assumed that we are first created as individuals and then form relationship to other. ‘Self’ and ‘other’ are always in a dichotomous relationship. The concept of ‘other’ is integral in a sense as people construct roles for themselves in relation to an other. Though initially the term was provided with a theoretical basis in the discipline of philosophy by George Wilhelm
Friedrich Hegel in the 18th century, the concept of other has received numerous implications in the hand of various scholars of different disciplines. Adrian N. Carr (1997) observes two of the most fundamental assumptions in the relationship of other and self. First, the relationship is binary and the second the relationship is generally characterised by mutual influence and negotiation with a high degree of consciousness and rationality. A dichotomous relationship of self and other is not only assumed but it is further assumed there is some kind of binary opposition in which there is struggle for predominance. William Heard Kilapatrick (1941) comments that “consciousness of self and consciousness of others emerge simultaneously to the individual, each growing and contributing during the rest of life mutually to round out and implement the other. Selfhood is a conglomerate of ideas and characteristics that best define how one sees himself or herself in relation to the world surrounding him or her and also he or she is perceived by the world around him or her. The different others may provide different forms of identity to an individual.

While talking about the environmental connection, Andrew J. Weigert (1997) comments that earthly life is first of all ecological. The meaning of things, person and objects arise from interaction. Natural meaning or identification emerges from interaction with the elements of environment. Such view is an offshoot of ecological perspective of social psychology.

The basic question regarding the identification of self in a multicultural context is whether it is a reflection of situational and contextual variants or there is a sense of stability and centrality attached to it? To specify and characterise the dimensions of self theorists have concentrated on its structural properties, their processes and components. Self is extended in time and space. From the perspective of space, self is increasingly a part of a process. Questions are raised regarding the
existential reality of self and consciousness. Consciousness is the means of revealing oneself as something existing. The consciousness is not only individual but it is culturally constructed. Therefore self is by and large a cultural construction and also phenomenological entity. It also refers to the practices that produce meaning in the society. Therefore, the very idea of ‘cultural ideology’ and ‘social membership’ determines one’s self in a given socio-cultural context. Self includes experiences of ‘I’. Hume in his ‘A Treatise of Human Nature’ argued that if any impression gives rise to the idea of self, the impression must continue invariably the same, throughout the whole course of our lives. He also contended that nothing is constant and invariable. In this fluid state of mind the different perceptions succeed one after another resulting in a perpetual flux. The identity which we ascribe to the mind is only a fictitious one. The sense of relativity will always loom large over there. Increasingly dynamic nature of the cultural process necessitates the multidimensional concept of self.

2.4.2. Dialogic Self

Usually concept of self refers to something ‘internal’; that happens within the minds of the individual. Dialogue is associated with an external process that takes place between people who are involved in communication. Considering society as populated, stimulated and renewed by individuals in developments it is not easy to consider the concept of self in isolation.

The dialogic self theory emerges out of the interface of two traditions, namely American pragmatism and Russian Dialogism. The dialogical self is a psychological concept which describes the mind’s ability to imagine the different positions of participants in an internal dialogue, in close connection with external dialogue. The study of dialogic self is necessitates for a profound understanding of the interconnection self and society. A dialogic self is portrayed that functions multi voiced. With the
emergence of the dialogic self the fourth model is introduced with its three models viz. traditional, modern and post-modern. The traditional one considers the connection with nature. The modern self concentrates on the emergence of personal autonomy and self development that has liberated many people from the oppression of the strong hierarchical order. It has led the self that is encapsulated within itself and was at risk of loneliness. It resulted in a loss of basic contact with the external world. The post modern self recognises the historical and social circumstances landing on a plane of more sensitivity and openness to the multiplicity and flexibility of the human mind.

As a part of the evolution of the concept of self the 'dialogic self' owes its origin to the 'dialogic self' theory created and developed by Dutch Psychologist Hubert Hermans (1937- ). The study of dialogic self paves the way for a better understanding of the connection between self and society. Self is associated with internal while dialogue is associated with the external. Such an understanding provides an extension to the very concept of self. An individual has to take various roles as a member of the society. The arena of the personal space is broadened. Our minds' journey through the developments of body corresponding to the important turning points of life and hence acquire various self positions. In a boundary-crossing and globalizing world, the personal and social positions in self and identity become increasingly dense, heterogeneous and even conflicting. In this handbook scholars of different disciplines, nations and cultures (East and West) bring together their views and applications of dialogical self theory in such a way that deeper commonalities are brought to the surface.

2.4.3. Communal Selfhood

Communal selfhood or communal identity refers to the distinct traditions, values and norms of a community. Communities provide a wealth of organized and deep rooted knowledge, which builds from
countless interactions of various socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural attributes that occur over time. This knowledge becomes the property of that particular community and plays an important role in shaping the identity structures of its members. The resources of the community facilitate social interaction and foster the process of identity formation. Norms developed within a community guides the behavior and enable the members to develop collective selfhood. It is important to understand the mechanism that enables the actors to develop shared understanding i.e. the underlying structure that allows the members to interact and to develop a sense of identity.

While analyzing myth as telling identities here is an attempt to analyse myth as discourse that can be employed in the construction of communal identity. Myths are carried by the members of a community generation after generation. In order to make an attempt to project the concept of identity, culture plays an important role in the development and functioning of the psyche. Folk narratives being the umbrella term to include myth play an important role in all cultures. Identity takes shape in the stories we tell about ourselves. They are narratives that we construct as we orient our present choices and actions in the light of our imagined futures and versions of our own past that fits with these projects. Narrative has become a favoured concept among the practitioners of human science who study collectivities. The stories that the individuals create often strike variations upon a repertoire of socially available narratives that in turn legitimate the community and guarantee its existence.

The study of selfhood unfolds the fact that to exist is a spiral process that dramatically unfolds in time. A desire to know about the past, origin of the universe as well as our existence gives rise to the formulation of the myths irrespective of age and space. In this context reference is made to Sauravpran Goswami (2008). In his seminal book 'Self' he observes that
to exist means to be in a situation. Situations are constantly changing. They are linked to each other' (p. 186).

Myths are constructed around the natural phenomenon around us which is termed as ‘operation of physical phenomena’ by the pioneering English anthropologist E.B. Taylor (1832-1917). Levi Strauss in his structuralist approach regards myth as classifying phenomena. So the subject matter of myth according to Levi Strauss is the encounter with the world experienced as contradictory not as alien.

2.4.4. Collective Self

A shift is noticed during the recent decades on the concentration of self from individual self concept to the collective one. We are all individually involved in identities of various kinds in desperate contexts, in our own respective lives, arising from our background, or association, or social activities. To belong to different groups in one way or other results in collective notion of self which potentially provide an important sense of identity. As mentioned by Amartya Sen ‘one’s identity with one’s community must be the principal or dominant identity a person has.’ (2006:33). Questions can also be raised whether community membership is a kind of extension of one’s self. People live in groups. Group living is an adaption that provides protection, cooperation and communication to improve the chance of survival. French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) shifted his focus from individual realm to the domain of the social frame of collective experience. The group must share some features of identification to identify themselves as a group.

Collective identity at the collective group level concerns “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarity” (Taylor & Whittier 1992). Group identification forms the link between collective and social identity, and thus forms the
bridge between the individual and collective level of identity. Different levels of identity require different levels of analyses. A group's collective identity can be studied by examining such phenomena as the group's symbols, rituals, beliefs, and the values its members share. An individual's identification with a group can be studied in its own right as well as by examining the individual's beliefs, sentiments, commitment to the group, use of symbols, participation in rituals, and so on.

Collective identity is conceived as an emergent group phenomenon. Melucci refers to the process of collective identity:

"Collective identity is an interactive, shared definition of the field of opportunities and constraints offered to collective action produced by several individuals that must be conceived as a process because it is constructed and negotiated by repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals to groups." (1989: 793)

Hence, identity is not a given fact; identity is a practical accomplishment, a process. Identifying ourselves or others is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation.

Group identification. Group identification links social identity to collective identity and is the social psychological answer to the question of what drives people to participate in protest. Because it bridges individual and collective identity processes, the stronger the group identification, the more shared beliefs and fate are incorporated in the individual's social identity and the more people are prepared to take action on behalf of the group. However, individuals do not incorporate the complete picture but rather a selection of what a collective identity encompasses.

2.5. Conception of Selfhood in Assamese Society

Living through folklore unfolds to our attachment with the basic components of society and nature. The discussion above clearly
conceptualizes the sense of self is negotiated with the surrounding in which one lives. The Assamese selfhood, a multiple construction indeed, refers to the historically conceptualised identification of the people who happen to settle in the Brahmaputra Valley throughout the ages. It is historically tested that the Assamese identity formation process has not been a smooth journey. The region has faced invasion and domination of various forces. The prime result of such invasions has been the change of the demographic set up of the land. The multiethnic nature of the land is enriched layer after layer by the people who arrive in the land either as invaders or as explorer. The Assamese selfhood in the collective sense of the term is formed with the people who speak the Assamese language or who are the descendents of Ahom kingdoms after whom the term *Asom* has been believed to come into existence.

The present study tries to see the environmentally oriented psychology of the people living in Assam. The influence that place has on identity in this study is seen as a result of a holistic and reciprocal interaction between people and their physical environment; people affect places, and places (and the way places are affected) influence how people see themselves. The way the interaction between people and place is understood has implications for the explanation of the environment's influence on identity. The places people have belonged to shape their environmental preferences, and how they see themselves. People's identity does not only affect what kind of environment they seek, but it also influences the places they belong to. People personalize their homes, trying to make it reflect who they are. Home and home place are maybe the most important places in people's life, and therefore the most important places to influence identity.

Queries arise how the interaction between people and place is understood. Such studies have implications not only for the explanation of the environment's influence on identity, but also for the definition of
environmental psychology, for research methods and the development of theories on specific subjects within the field. At the same time, some of the different theoretical perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and the use of theory depends on type of research (Bell et al., 2001). Environmental psychology has been through a development of different perspectives of place.

Attempt is made in this study to see how the Brahmaputra River is endowed with meanings resulting in a consciousness to connect it with the selfhood of the people of Assam. The Brahmaputra, the gift of nature was treated to mark the geographical boundary of the land through which it flows. It is noteworthy that the physical shape of the land in the earlier days was not like the present one, it was subject to the annexing territories in different phases of history. After the independence of India in 1947 some parts seceded from Assam with new administration. Gunabhiram Barua in his 'Assam Buranj' (2008) clearly states that 'the name 'Assam' is new to this region, earlier this name was not there. And the boundary that is decided now was not same. This part of land was mentioned in Mahabharata, Kalikapuran, Bhagawat, Jogingitrantra. From the study of Puranas it is known that Kamarup, Sonitpur, Hidamba, Manipur and Koundilya of earlier times are known as Assam now. (p.4).

Within this fragmented structure of the land the Assamese has been holding the affinity by following Assamese way of life and thus constructing the Assamese selfhood. As mentioned in the above section, the knowledge about the heritage is a clue to the feelings of affinity to the community. All these are stored in the cultural memory about the place, the habits, practices, interaction of a concerned group. Jnanpith Award winning Assamese writer Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya (1980) in his article ‘The Assamese Mind’ comments that “a large part of the Assamese thinking, writing and journalism is devoted to discovery of his collective self.”(p. 86). In the same article Bhattacharyya also concentrates on the
contribution of the river Brahmaputra—"the valley of the Male river have also shaped the Assamese mind."

The physical place is transformed into psychological place when it is stored in cultural memory. It is also connected with the sense of rootedness. As far as the question of the Brahmaputra is concerned, its flow since the prehistoric times remains the reality for their existence. In spite of the differences in the multi layered ethnicity the river provides the sense of psychological space that turns out to be an umbrella. It is also true that the different types of domination that the common people of Assam faced could not dishearten them as they are inspired by the cultural memory about the role of the Brahmaputra in the past in fulfilling the needs of people. The national character of the Assamese is resulted from the communication of heritage manifested in the form of literature, art and culture. The interpretation of the communication regulates relationship to social groups thereby ensuring solidarity. The collective selfhood thus formed means the competencies which enables an individual to speak and act and therefore enable one to take part in the process of communication and understanding, thereby confirming the identity.

The understanding of Assamese selfhood in the backdrop of a river requires in-depth study of life and cultural aspects connected with it. By analysing water of the Brahmaputra across the state, the main objective is to shed new light onto fundamental matters for humans by analysing parts of the processes which constitute people’s identities and lives, aiming to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of continuity and change in the past and present with implications for the future. An understanding of how and why water constitutes identities and forms cultural values will enable new knowledge with historical importance which also renders possible other solutions and alternatives to today’s challenges in the Brahmaputra River Basin region. This aspect is elaborated in detail in Chapter III of the thesis.
The question is in what context a river represents the community who live on its bank. It must have insisted an impression of much greater importance than the other factors that distinguishes a nation. The ecological parity of the Brahmaputra Basin region with its inherent varied worlds of water renders it possible to identify certain shared values that can be used as symbols of identity uniting different populations living in the whole region. It also facilitates analyses of several distinctive water traditions in the basin’s sub-regions, since different types of water are given particular values and importance. Both the usage of water and the degree of scarcity or abundance at a given time enable particular ecological adaptations, possibilities and problems. Hence, have the identities founded in the various water-worlds been and are they still the solutions to the development of the whole Brahmaputra Basin region, or have they been and are they still the problems for unity and sources of conflicts, since water is fundamental for everyone and deeply rooted in culture and tradition? Through a broad multi-disciplinary approach, it is possible to analyse these questions by comparing past and present water traditions in the banks of the Brahmaputra.

The society in Assam has witnessed fusion of different indigenous communities resulting in a continuous formation of cultural mosaic rather than a melting pot. An important manifestation is the liberalism of the Assamese folk mind. The tendency for ready acceptance of the culture and life style of other groups is possible as numerous group of people have been attracted to the valley from time immemorial. Dr Promod Chandra Bhattacharyya (1980) in his article ‘Assam Fosters Assimilation Throughout the Ages’ remarks that “the hills, rivers and valleys with green vegetation and forst will the geographical unity and influence the people more or less so far the original inhabitation are concerned.”
Exploring the heritage of the Brahmaputra valley unfolds folk material reflecting issues connected with the expression of selfhood as emerged from the rich natural surroundings. The valley being a pre-colonial crossroad is marked by strong cultural identity. The egalitarian and liberal nature of Assamese society is celebrated through different folk materials which are discussed in the Chapter III of this book.